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Spirits in the Mountains:
Va.'s Blue Ridge Region a Magnet for Diverse Centers of Enlightenment

by Theresa Vargas

As the story goes, Sri Swami Satchidananda was flying over Buckingham when he saw the land below and picked it as the site of Yogaville. The founder of the Gathering, another spiritual community along Virginia's Blue Ridge Mountains, was in New York when, it's said, he dreamed of the abandoned hospital in Schuyler that would take his group a year to find and a decade to rebuild.

Others speak of an indescribable energy that might have drawn them here.

"There's something about the mountains," said Bill McRae of Sevenoaks Pathwork Center in Madison. "The world's most spiritual people are in the mountains."

Whatever the reason, a spectrum of spiritual communities has settled and expanded over the years in rural counties near Charlottesville, creating in many ways an enlightenment hub. It is a place where Tibetan monks can be found minutes from New Age mystics, and jewelry stores sell such items as Om necklaces. People travel from other countries just to spend weekends here, and suburbanites have been known to abandon their lifestyles to stay.

That's what Alan Scherr, 58, did before he and his 13-year-old daughter, Naomi, were killed in the Mumbai terrorist attacks late last month. Today, hundreds are expected to attend a memorial service for the two at the Synchronicity Foundation in Faber, where the Scherrs, along with wife and mother Kia, lived for 11 years, practicing high-tech meditation in the relative solitude afforded by being three hours from Washington.

Neighbors say that before the deaths turned an international spotlight on Synchronicity, they knew that the group existed but could describe little about it.

Just as they knew there were others -- many others.

"It's just a really diverse grouping, with everybody being accepting of pretty much everything as long as you're good and kind," said Julie Bendle, a Nelson County real estate agent who has found property for those who came for retreats and decided to remain. "These people feel comfortable being here and are totally accepted, which is not to say a lot of people, myself included, don't know what they're all about."

Within a short distance from Synchronicity, one can find groups rooted in the most traditional Eastern practices and others pushing the boundaries of modern beliefs. In less than a half-hour drive, one can meditate with Tibetan monks at Ligmincha Institute, ponder the role of extraterrestrials with members of the Gathering and explore human consciousness through sound at the Monroe Institute. A little farther northeast lies the Sevenoaks Pathwork Center.

The center serves as a school for psychological and spiritual healing and a retreat for any group that needs one. On some days, one can find a class of mostly Catholic and Jewish middle-aged suburbanites talking about their "wounded child," and on others, one can stumble upon Buddhists retreating in silence or shamans beating on drums.

Karl Hohenstein, 58, who grew up in Buffalo as the son of a housewife and an engineer, gravitated here after a motorcycle accident left him injured. It seemed a logical evolution from the massage classes he was taking. He liked that Pathwork focused on transforming the worst in people, "all the things we bury and choose not to see about ourselves," he said.

Why he has stayed for 20 years, working at the center, is another story.

"There's something here that I haven't ever sought to define, but something energetic," Hohenstein said, adding that he believes it is strongest when daylight starts to fade. "Sometimes, when there's no one here, I feel like the air in the land is full of voice or creativity. I'm serving that."

For a while, he also lived at Yogaville.

More than an hour away, off a windy road that crosses the James River, the Yogaville compound in Buckingham County houses about 250 residents. The community is large enough that it has its own phone book, credit union and elementary school.

"We live in a village, which I think is the natural, healthy way that people are meant to live in the world," the Rev. Paraman Barsel said one day last week. "And the reason people feel so alienated in the city is because it's so unnatural to not know your neighbors."

That afternoon, he was eating a lunch of lentils, rice and sweet potatoes with three other reverends in the community, including his wife, Lakshmi Barsel. A vegetarian diet is part of the rules in Yogaville, which also prohibit drinking, smoking and using illegal drugs. Other than that, Paraman Barsel said, individuality is embraced. He describes himself as a Jewish man from Philadelphia who never thought he'd live in the country.

"We're all about loving and appreciating all paths, all people," Barsel said, adding that he knows there are critics who characterize the place as a cult. "There's people who think Elvis is still alive. But I really think anyone who comes and sees it, more than just for five minutes with their mind already made up, eventually ends up concluding this isn't a cult at all. These are regular folks who are trying to lead a healthy, peaceful life and service-oriented life."

A shrine built in the likeness of a giant lotus flower, its pastel pink petals jutting skyward, has altars featuring each major religion, leaving space for lesser-known ones and those yet to be discovered. Lakshmi Barsel sat there silently one day last week.

Born Linda Magnetti and raised Catholic in San Francisco, she said "a crisis of faith" eventually brought her to this point.

"I couldn't accept that there was only one path and everyone else was sadly mistaken," she said.

Similarly, people at the Gathering speak of different religions as pieces of a whole. They wear yarmulkes and pray the rosary. Members also wear rings depicting the Star of David around a cross.

"Everyone knew their church wasn't giving them the whole story," said Esther Kern, 55, who was raised in Oxon Hill. "Everyone was looking for something more and found it when they found Tom and Isis."

Thomas and Isis Ringrose started the group in New York and moved it to Schuyler in the 1970s. Kern joined them after taking a nursing job at the University of Virginia hospital and is one of four remaining members who live in the meticulously refurbished house. The rooms are decorated in themes of distant lands and times so that one can go from the Italian dining room into the English library, or from a Chinese bedroom to one set in Persia. When the group was larger, Kern said, members would switch bedrooms every few months to expand their experiences and possibly channel their previous lives.

In addition to more traditional faiths, the group also believes in reincarnation, psychic abilities and extraterrestrial beings.

"All of us felt all of it was right," Kern said.

At the Monroe Institute in Faber, it doesn't matter what a person believes, Executive Director Paul Rademacher said. It is about experiences. In modest, dormitory-like rooms, beds are almost entirely enclosed behind walls to minimize outside distractions while participants use the group's "Hemi-Synch" technology. The group says that by receiving different tones through headphones, the two hemispheres of the brain start to work together, altering the states of consciousness.

"We don't have any dogma here. Anybody can come here with any belief. It doesn't matter to us. But we do ask them to at least consider the possibility that they might be more than a physical body," Rademacher said. "We don't tell them what that more is. That's up to them to discover. We just try to provide the context for that exploration to happen."

Robert Monroe, who was in the broadcasting business, started experimenting with sound after having repeated out-of-body experiences in the 1950s. He founded the institute in the late 1970s, and since then it has drawn thousands, including 26 Japanese visitors last week.

As part of the program, each would spend about an hour in a room big enough for only a bed. There, they would lie in complete darkness on a mattress filled with a water and salt mixture, listening to sounds, including ocean waves, flow through headphones.

"Potentially, what's going on here is actually more important than maybe what's happening in Washington, because what we're looking at is the transformation of human consciousness," said Rademacher, who was a Presbyterian pastor for 15 years. "When you change consciousness, you see the world differently."

He said that he doesn't know all the reasons why the institute ended up in Faber -- an area even some locals describe as "the middle of nowhere" -- but that he doesn't doubt that unseen forces might have been at work.

"I've been told that there is a huge crystal structure under Nelson County," he said. "There are influences that can't be seen that guide events whether we know it or not."

Blue Ridge becomes haven for spiritual centers

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The Rev. Lakshmi Barsel spends time in the Pink Lotus Shrine at the Yogaville compound in Buckingham, Va., which houses about 250 residents. Virginia's Blue Ridge Mountains are home to a number of spiritual retreats.